

# Response, Response-ability, Responsibility

Six

When Liberty decided that her draft about the school fair was ready to go into the class newsletter, she announced from the Author's Chair, "This is my article for the newsletter, and it's done. When I finish reading it to you, I want you to tell me what you think is the most interesting piece of news in it." She read and several hands went up.

The first student to respond said, "Hands down, the notes. I had no idea the messengers delivered eighty-two!"

"To me, the most interesting news was . . . ," added another student, and on it went.

They gave Liberty the response she requested. The sixth-grade teachers at Stratham say their students share for this type of celebratory response more than any other. Response supported this writer-reader's confidence in her ability to make decisions. Writing and reading aren't formulaic. There was no rule to tell Liberty what to include in her article, but she felt she had made wise decisions. Regardless, she wanted to know which news bits struck her readers as noteworthy.

On another day around the Author's Chair, Nathaniel read a draft about the students' first-grade reading buddies. He was not finished and requested examples of "funny things that have happened when you were with your buddy." He heard several and chose a couple to write into his draft.

On a third day, Angela read aloud from a book she was in the midst of, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (Curtis 1995). She had never before heard about the bombing of the church and

was confused. Several students had already read this book and carefully tried to explain this difficult event to her.

These students purposely use occasions to share as opportunities to move their writing and reading forward or to learn about the impact of their work. They plan ahead and take advantage of their time in the Author's Chair, which is very different from situations in which students in years past read drafts, and classmates, without guidance from the presenter, offered suggestions such as "I think you should. . . ." These kinds of evaluations by others, we now know, can undercut the writer's own evaluation of her work. She quickly thinks that to evaluate herself is not her responsibility, that evaluation rests in the hands of others. Unfortunately, this kind of thinking does little to help the person see herself as an independent learner.

Sometimes the student who shares seeks open response. As Pete settled into the chair he said, "Anything goes, folks. When I finish, tell me what you like, ask me questions, give me suggestions, anything. Ready?" He read and they did offer him a potpourri of response, which is what he wanted, and he later sorted through it as he shaped his draft.

### **Readers and Writers Seek Response**

Seeking response is natural. The ultimate learners are tiny children who begin to make sense of an ultraconfusing world the second they burst forth into it. They respond to touch, love, and the souls of those who provide warmth. These small beings hear words, eventually sort out what they mean, and learn how to use words to get the attention and needs they deem important.

They ask zillions of questions as they use language to help them figure out things. But, children vary tremendously when we look at what they wonder about, whom they ask questions of, and how assertive they are. The people around them inadvertently show toddlers the family's ways of finding out about their world. Some families work together, some limit their inquiries, and some explore everywhere. Some use many words, some use many crayons, and some use little of either.

Inquiry is an act of imposition (Lindfors 1999), and children learn how to impose. Some live life straight on, and others circle around. Some ask questions directly, and others tell you stories, expecting you to respond with yours.

Students seek response around the Author's Chair, in small groups, in conferences with their teacher, and when they interact with others during their workshop time. Often it is from the teacher they seek response. The teacher's role as responder to readers and writers is curious. Whereas her role is to teach, within the teaching of literacy we label this role *response*. The

teacher responds to students' requests, to students' needs at any time during the school day; careful acknowledgment of others is a way of life. Often students seek attention at unexpected moments.

Jill Ostrow (1998) wrote about her multiage, grades 4–6 classroom and her insistence on the students' continuous respect for one another. When one boy said, "I'm not sittin' by no girl!" Jill knew he was seeking attention, but from her he received none at that moment. She leaned back in her chair, wondering what the class would say. The others called the boy on the inappropriateness of his comment, and Jill led them as they all worked, throughout the year, on their interactions with one another.

Evan, a fifth grader at the Stratham elementary school, wanted the overall response he was receiving to change. As a student who went to the resource room for part of his day, he burned under the scorn of some of the boys in his classroom. But, in writing, he found his niche. He loved to write poems and shared them regularly with the class during October. At the end of the month he read the following poem:

### Halloween

Ghosts and goblins.  
Howling wolves.  
Crying cats.  
Witches on brooms  
with green hair  
flying through the air.  
Little children  
yelling, "Trick or treat!"

His classmates were in awe of his poetry, but they were confused. After all, he went to the resource room. They didn't expect this of him, but his poems did start to temper their teasing. Further, Chad and Lester wondered how to cast him in a story they were writing. They thought he should be the wizard, but, "It's kind of weird for Evan to be a wizard," Lester said.

"He doesn't have much power. He's a beginner," Chad said.

Later, as the two boys continued to write, they turned to me and explained, "Evan's the dumbo in this story. He's not a dumbo really, but he is in this story. Sometimes he is, a little, like when he laughs." They turned to nearby Evan and said, "Evan, laugh."

Evan emitted a weird laugh. He performed, but I feared he hated this light teasing. This was kindness, however, compared to how Chad used to tease Evan. The tone had started to change; Evan noticed the difference, and wanted his situation to improve even more. He had started to see himself as someone with potential.

Evan wanted to get out of the resource room. He refused to listen to the social studies tapes they provided to accompany his

classroom text. He gutted his way through the book. Evan wanted to write his entries in his reading notebook to his grade 5 teacher, not to the resource room adults. He wanted to become more involved in his classroom. Evan relished the positive response he received when he read his poetry to the class and wanted to do something to ensure this tone in other situations.

He wrote a book for his classmates:

### How to Write Poems

First	Look around the classroom Get ideas
Second	Read some poetry
Third	Write down things
Fourth	Share with friends and get ideas
Fifth	Elaborate them Share with classroom Get more ideas
Sixth	Elaborate more and write more poems Then publish
Seventh	Make sure you have pictures
Eighth	Make sure you leave extra pages so you can put more poems in back of book

With this special invitation, he hoped others would be more inclined to seek help from him with their poetry, and they were. This impact of his writing was important to Evan but, more importantly, he had found a way to shine, to hold a needed position in his community. This is what Evan sought, crafted, and eventually received. Inclusion became the overall response pattern of his classmates.

### Readers and Writers Respond to Others

We base response on the assumption that the writer wants to go back to work. In order for students to be able to respond in supportive ways when a reader-writer seeks no specific response, teachers teach various possibilities.

I will show various options for response to one example, a draft of a poem written by Devon, a second-grade boy in Mast Way School in New Hampshire. All of these options would probably never occur as responses to one piece of writing, but they are all possibilities teachers consider when they look at the overall types of response they want to occur in their classrooms.

**Hockey**

Hockey is a winter sport.  
 It needs ice to move.  
 When you skate,  
 ice chips fly behind you.  
 Swish, swish, swish,  
 your skates move along the ice  
 while you handle the heavy rubber puck.  
 Swosh, swosh, swosh,  
 your skates are picking up speed  
 while you skate across the blue line.  
 You pass to your team mate.  
 He skates across the red line.  
 We're half way to the goal.  
 Swash, swash, swash,  
 you're almost full speed  
 when you're crossing the opposite blue line.  
 Swip, swip, swip,  
 you're full speed.  
 While you're in the circle  
 your stick goes back.  
 You shoot  
 and score!

**Responding to Content** At the end of his reading to the class, Devon said aloud, "I play hockey, and I know how to move the puck fast." It's quite natural for a writer to make a comment about his own work, sort of as a postscript. He wants to make sure his audience gets it.

The first person to comment picked up on what Devon started. He emphasized the content of his poem, and the child who spoke did likewise, "And you know the sounds of hockey!" A different response from a class member or teacher might have been, "You sure do know how to move it fast!" This would have been more specifically related to what Devon had said. Regardless, responding to the content is often a starting place in response. Authors write to deliver information, and they want their message to come through.

If this had been a poem written by a professional writer and read to the class by Devon, his comment to open the discussion might have been exactly the same, "I play hockey, and I know how to move the puck fast." The first response from the class might have been questions about Devon's playing or confirmation about what he did. Eventually, however, they would return to the text. If not, the teacher would do so by entering into the discussion: "You know, Devon, in that poem you read, the author created great sounds. Could you read them again?"

**Responding with Connections to Life Experiences** Devon could have offered the following as his first comment after

reading his poem to his classmates: "I'm in the Spurts League." He didn't say this in his poem, but he could have added this information after the reading. If he had, children might have immediately responded with information about their leagues and teams. However, eventually they would return to Devon's poem to talk specifically about the worth of some of his exact words. Returning to the author's work is crucial. I have been in a few situations where response never focused on the student's piece of writing, and the writer invariably expressed concern at some later time.

An alternative scene for Devon's sharing could have been a conference with his teacher. He could have offered his "I'm in the Spurts League" comment and she might have responded with questions about his league. Maybe she would have added, "I might go to a game sometime." If she were to go, she would verify the importance of the students' outside lives to their classroom work.

**Responding to the Use of Language** It is always good to point out specific words to a writer, words that have stayed with you. Writers appreciate knowing which words are effective. Often responders ask the writer, "What specific words are you glad you used?"

Devon could have replied, "I used good action words! I changed from *swish*, to *swosh*, to *swash*, to *swip* when he scored." These occasions for self-evaluation give the writer opportunities to congratulate himself amidst others who appreciate his skill.

"Yes, they're great action words. How'd you make 'em up?"

The conversation would then continue.

Similar conversations focus on the use of language when students share the writing of professionals. Writers love words, and finding the right one can be as exciting as finding the right piece for a thousand-piece puzzle.

**Responding to the Writing Process Used** Trish Sutphen, Devon's teacher, knew how this poem came to be, wanted the class to know, and therefore requested, "Could you tell everyone how you started to write this?"

Devon said, "This is the first time I saw pictures in my mind before I wrote something."

"What do you mean?" asks someone.

Devon reminded the class of the recent occasion when Trish had read them a poem, asked them to picture it in their minds, and suggested they create pictures on manila paper. Instead, Devon had created his poem at that time. The children were intrigued with this new way to go about writing, by starting with pictures in your mind. As writers, they were interested in varia-

tions of the writing process that their classmates used in particular situations.

Trish added, "And this is the first time you wrote an entire piece of writing with such enthusiasm in one sitting." This writing process had worked, and it might for someone else. They all knew that their writing processes differed from one another's and differed in various situations.

**Responding to the Effect of the Writing on Readers** Devon might have said, "I think people can picture the ice chips flying. People who don't know about hockey will know how fast we skate."

"Right, it's easy to picture the ice flying behind you. It goes off like this," a speaker might have responded, flinging his arms to the side while confirming Devon's thought about the impact of his poem. Writers want assurance that their writing can affect others. The purpose of much writing is to get response. It's supposed to make a difference. When writers feel this potential, they get a heady feeling that allows them to take off.

Similarly, if this poem had been written by a professional, and someone read it to the class, the listeners might have responded to its effect on them. For example, "It made me feel excited, like when I score in soccer!"

**Responding to the Use of Conventions** In an editing conference, Devon said, "I used periods and commas."

His teacher responded, "Excellent. You did. The commas between the sound words are especially helpful to the reader. So, let's see. You do have some capitals that need to be fixed. Whom could you go to?" They agreed on two possible student-helpers, and Devon was off.

This corresponds to a situation in which another student in the class was practicing so he could read Devon's poem to his buddy in a different classroom. "I can read all the regular words without it sounding choppy, but I can't keep *swish*, *swosh*, and *swash* apart," he said.

These are straightforward short vowel sounds, but in this context the reader needed to have this pointed out to him. He didn't appear to have the necessary meta-awareness of his short vowels. An extremely brief, on-the-spot lesson from his teacher clarified these sounds and this reader was prepared.

**Responding to Requests** "I would like to know how to shape this on a page," is a request Devon made at one point. He knew what he wanted to work on.

"OK, we can work on that," Trish responded. When her students are engaged in their writing and reading she seldom has a chance to wonder, "What should I teach?" They seek constant

teaching from her—direct instruction, on the spot, while they are in the process of writing and reading. These students see themselves with potential, see themselves with a future, and intend to direct that future.

Frequently, Devon's teacher takes one request and turns it into a mini-lesson, as she did with this opportunity. Devon showed the class his earlier, unshaped poem, and the shape I have used here, his final shape, for comparison. On three successive days, three other students put drafts of poems on overhead projector transparencies for the class to help them reshape. Typically, mini-lessons come in a series that all focus on one topic, such as the shapes of poems. Most writing and reading strategies are too complicated to learn in one brief lesson.

The scene for Devon's request could have been different. He might have asked the class rather than the teacher for a particular kind of help. These requests need to be handled with care. Sometimes classmates become overzealous in their helpfulness. Probably three suggestions is plenty. This gives the writer enough options without overloading him with possibilities.

It is important to keep in mind that suggestions to a writer come in response to a specific request from the writer. The writer evaluates his work, finds a need, and asks for help. Respondents seldom step in with unsolicited suggestions.

**Responding with Possible Future Writing in Mind** It is quite common for students to want to know one another's plans. Later on in the class discussion, a student asked, "What are you going to write next?"

Devon said, "I could write a poem about each game we won."

"Yes," responded another, "and you could write about how you learned to play."

"Or, about practice."

Writers write and they are always looking ahead. Devon's idea to write a series of poems about each game might have prompted someone else to write a series about each of his cousins or about every recess for a week. Writers are always on the alert for ideas.

If this had been a poem written by a professional, and Devon had read it to the class, someone might have asked a similar question at some point in the discussion, such as "What are you going to read next?" Readers, as well as writers, plan ahead.

**Responding to Connections with Other Students** In a small group, Devon, still thinking about what he might do next, said, "I could talk to Bud and write about a time he and I took the puck all the way down the rink."

Bud jumped at the chance to do this, and they made a few quick plans. When students bring up the possibility of working with others, their teachers typically try to facilitate these connections and



even encourage others. Sometimes, of course, learners need to work alone, but the intermingling helps them see one another as writers and readers. Writing and reading are cool tasks to be involved in, and the teacher tries to promote this camaraderie, this sense that writing and reading are the things to do here.

When everyone is involved, response happens all around us, all the time. Kathy Perfect (1999) wrote about how important it is for her to constantly seek and value her students' thoughts about poetry. This determines their confidence in their ability to read poetry and keeps them engaged.

### **Readers and Writers Reflect**

How to respond to all of her little children's needs became problematic for Brenda Jentes, a first-grade teacher in Manchester. She talked about this when she spoke at a National Council of Teachers of English conference. "I was so gushy. I said, 'That's wonderful!' 'Oh, you're so special!' 'Oooh, your picture is sooo pretty!' 'That's wonderful!' all day long. Somehow, I thought that by constantly telling my little children that they were wonderful, they would not need me so much.

"But then one day, Cindy, the researcher who works in my classroom, and I were having one of our intense, heart-to-heart talks. We just love our children and we want so much for them to do well. Our conversation was about evaluation, the topic of our research. Everyone in our project wants to teach their students to evaluate themselves. The other classrooms in the project are of older students, but we are determined to teach our children to be able to say exactly what is good about a piece of their own writing.

"So, we decided to model for them. When we started to carefully monitor our words, we both heard ourselves saying, 'Oh, this is wonderful! This is great! I just love this! This is wonderful!' all day long. We weren't telling the children what they were doing well. Then, when we wanted them to tell us why they chose items for their portfolios, we wondered why they always said, 'I chose this because it's good.'

"We changed right away, but do you know how hard it is to stop telling children they are wonderful? But I had to. They couldn't evaluate themselves after my gushes. I needed to be quiet and say, 'Tell me about this.'

"'It's about my grandma.'"

"'Oh, tell me about her.'"

"'She lives with us.'"

"'She does? I used to live with my grandma. Please read it to me.'"

"The child reads her line of print and tells me about her picture. I sense she loves to feel her grandma's cat purr and notice

she has tried to write a word for this sound. The children love to represent sounds, and this is the first time Camille has tried to do so. Not surprising, she points to *pR* when I ask for her favorite word. She can evaluate her work.

"I tell her I am impressed by how well she wrote the special sound her gramma's cat makes when she's content. Camille and the other children devote longer and longer lengths of time to their writing when they know we all will quietly respond to their self-acknowledged, specific, forward strides."

Brenda's reflection caused her to change and set the stage for her students to think more carefully about themselves.

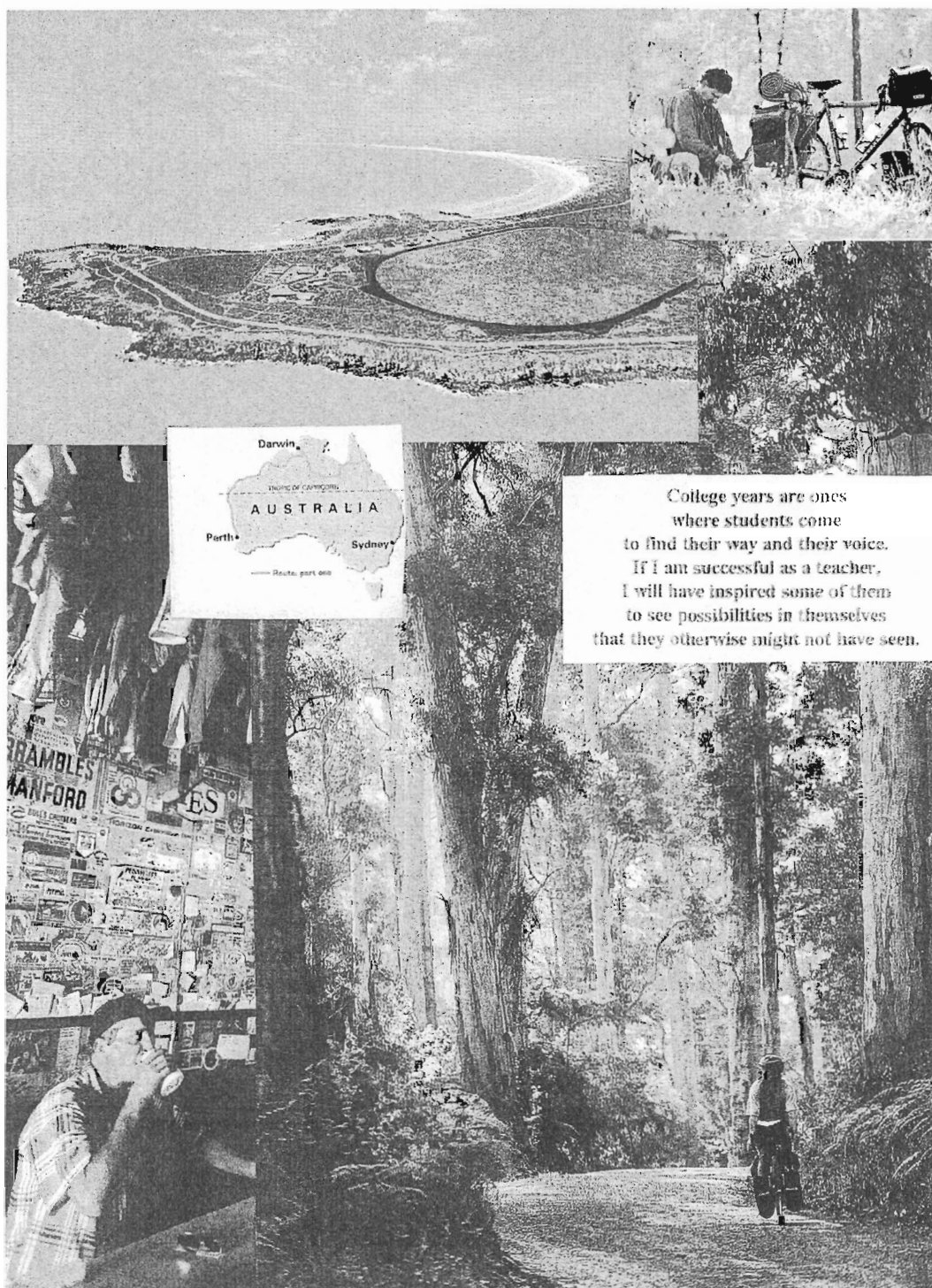
**Reflecting Through Art** Kathy Staley studies the role reflection plays in the lives of teacher educators who, in turn, advocate reflection. Kathy, a visual artist, studies teacher educators who aren't artists, but who have placed themselves in positions where they experience the power of the arts for themselves and their students. For some, their ability to find value in their own work occurs most readily when they use art as their mode of reflection.

One of the teacher educators Kathy has studied uses collage to reveal relationships among various aspects of his self. Dan began his consideration of art when he enrolled in one of my classes. I required the students to create three, two-part answers to the question "Who am I as a learner?" One part of each answer was to be in writing and the other part was to be shown via the visual arts, music, or performance.

Dan's three answers showed him as a learner who has an adventurous spirit, who has grown as a teacher, and who is constantly learning to be a parent of three children. For his entry about his adventurous spirit, he wrote a poem and created a collage (see Figure 6-1) that became a turning point for him. His depiction of exploration in Australia guided him as he kept his spirit alive. It appeared before his mind with more clarity than only a poem, and he is a published poet. His collage helped him focus on what he wanted to cultivate in himself.

Dan realized, for the first time, the significance of the visual arts to him. He now requires all of his students to create visuals for at least one assignment. Some gain a newfound appreciation for the arts and some closet artists sigh huge sighs of thankfulness. Few teachers have sought those students' preferred mode of expression, and Dan encourages them to continue to create visuals whenever an assignment provides space for them to make decisions about its form, and many assignments do.

One of the ways I introduce visual response to the students in my university class of K-12 teachers is for all of us to create visual responses to Tomi dePaola's *The Art Lesson* (1989). We have the best time! Each table shares a box of sixty-four crayons, per the book, and we use all kinds of paper. When we go around the



College years are ones  
where students come  
to find their way and their voice.  
If I am successful as a teacher,  
I will have inspired some of them  
to see possibilities in themselves  
that they otherwise might not have seen.

**Figure 6-1.** Dan's adventurous spirit.

class to share, we see cartoons, line drawings of our own school experiences, and shaded still scenes of fall vegetables. Our own art lesson shows the richness of variety, and our interpretations of this book become larger and deeper. We see it in new ways.

**Open Invitations for Reflections** An open invitation to respond to a piece of writing with your own thoughts often brings unexpected reflections. When Meg Floyd's first-grade daughter read aloud her homework story about young children who tease an overweight girl, Meg squirmed. Finally, when her daughter finished, Meg issued an open invitation: "What do you think this story is about?"

"It's about a girl who's fat and when she loses weight she'll have friends."

Meg became oh-so-scared about this message and talked to her daughter's teacher. This wise teacher instituted children's response to stories the very next day, a practice she had never before employed. She had always guided the children's responses to assigned stories, and for this story, in previous years, she had led them in a discussion about tolerance of difference. However, when she sought the children's own response, an entirely different discussion arose, of the type she continued to learn about in *Mosaic of Thought* (Keene & Zimmerman 1997). She wanted to hear the children's own thoughts and to be part of discussions of their viewpoints.

We want children to reflect on what they read, rather than reflect on the messages we think their stories contain. We learn a great deal, and so do our students, when their reflections set the agenda for our instruction. When we seek their responses as primary we help them see their own thoughts as worthy.

### **Hmmmm . . .**

Pat McLure's first-grade children raise chicks in the spring and invite other classes to their room to view them. Their guests love the babies in the incubator, and Pat's children proudly tell their visitors anything they want to know about their offspring. They have immersed themselves in a study of chicks and willingly dispense their expertise.

One day after visits by a second grade and a fourth grade, Pat called her class together to reflect on these visitations. "What did you learn from our guests?" she began.

Of the various comments, one struck me the most: "Second graders are smarter than fourth graders."

"Why do you say that?" Pat wondered.

"They asked more questions!"

When it comes to response, these little children cherish questions. The more queries, the more interested their visitors

evidently are. I learned about this importance of questions when Pat asked her children to reflect upon their experiences.

Setting aside time to reflect on visitations, reading groups, writing conferences, or other classroom experiences provides the teachers with information, tells students how much their teacher values their thoughts, and shows them the importance of reflection. Teachers set aside time to think back on what has happened. Experiences gain value when our students' thoughts inform us about an event.